

For Plainfield Firefighter, Protection Is Her First Name City's First Female Firefighter Currently Completing Training

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**Bernice Paglia
Correspondent
Courier News**

PLAINFIELD -- Her mother named her for the Egyptian goddess of magic and divine protection, and she served 10 years in the U.S. Marine Corps.

Selket Gregory, 28, the city's first female firefighter, and nine male residents who waited four years for the opportunity to serve in the Plainfield Fire Division are now completing training at the Middlesex County Fire Academy.

On a break Thursday at the main firehouse, Gregory talked about her new career.

"I always pretty much wanted to be a firefighter as a child," she said, noting her other choices were to be a farmer or an astronaut.

Four years ago, she said, a Marine colleague who was a firefighter in Jersey City encouraged her to go for it. On deployment when the firefighter test was administered, she took a make-up test. But she wasn't sure anything would come of it.

When a letter for certification arrived in December 2006, she said, "It was definitely quite a surprise."

She and the nine men were sworn in July 6 by Plainfield's mayor, Sharon Robinson-Briggs.

Gregory said her fitness was a help in the rigorous training.

"I live in the gym," she said, "anywhere that's going to get the heart pumping."

Weighty military gear prepared her for donning comparable firefighting equipment, she said, and she expects her Marine experience to ease the transition of being the first woman on duty in the firehouse.

"I consider all of the Marines in my unit to be part of my extended family," she said. "We live together, eat together, work together and play together."

Department of Community Affairs spokesman Chris Donnelly said Thursday there are an estimated 500 female firefighters in New Jersey, but because it is not required to report to the state whether a firefighter is male or female, the number may be higher.

As described on the Women in Fire Service Web site, female firefighters can sometimes encounter hostility. Gregory foresees fitting right in.

"It should be just like any other job," she said.

The academy opened her eyes to the cerebral side of firefighting, she said. In controlled burns, she learned the "thought process" that goes into dealing with actual blazes, such as knowing building materials and ventilation techniques.

"It's a continuing effort," she said. "I will continue to learn as long as I'm here."

That could be a long time, as firefighters tend to stay on until retirement. That was one reason Gregory and the others had to wait for vacancies.

Her fellow trainees include former teacher David Damon, 24; second generation firefighter Donte Thompson, 23, who was a U.S. Army specialist; former truck driver Mark Smith, 34; former Plainfield Municipal Utilities foreman Terrance Franklin, 38; Corey Henry Sr., 27, who was a corrections officer in Maryland; former Cingular field technician Vernon Nelson, 34; Takeem Muslim, 38, who drove a school bus for Amaker & Porterfield; automotive dispatcher Kevin Smith, 35 and Michael Hoover, 34, who was not present Thursday.

Gregory said when her mother, Beatrice, was pregnant, she visited the King Tut exhibit in New York City and learned that Selket was one of the goddesses who guarded King Tut in his tomb. She chose the name of the golden scorpion goddess for her daughter. Beatrice and Vernon Gregory also have a son, Munir.

"My family is very supportive of everything that I do," the new firefighter said. "I plan to learn as much as I can and be a part of this Plainfield fire team. I hope I can make everyone proud."